

Helping Your Child Deal with Bullying

Overview

Ways to help when your child is being bullied or is bullying others.

- Helping your child cope with a bully
- Discouraging your child from bullying others
- When bullying occurs at school

Bullying is very common in many schools and neighborhoods, and it can be extremely painful to children. Both girls and boys can be bullied, but boys tend to experience bullying more often, especially during the adolescent and teenage years. Studies show that 15-25 percent of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency, while 15-20 percent of students say they bully others.

Although bullying can take many forms, it often includes verbal abuse, such as taunts, name-calling, cruel teasing, or threats. In some cases, it involves stealing or vandalizing another child's belongings and actual physical violence. Bullying can happen online, too. Through e-mail, instant messaging, and Internet chatrooms, children and adolescents can spread hurtful images and messages.

When you learn that your child is being bullied or is bullying others, it's important to talk to your child about the situation. By providing loving support and guidance, you can help your child find ways to deal with the very intense feelings that bullying usually involves and keep the situation from getting worse. You also need to find out enough about the situation to know whether your child is at risk.

Helping your child cope with a bully

When you learn that your child is being bullied, your first instinct might be to call the parents of the bully and demand that they do something about the situation. It's usually more effective to offer support and suggestions to help your child handle the problem.

If you call the parents of the bully, they may punish their child, and the bully may become angry and take it out on your child. Even if that doesn't happen, your child won't learn from the situation if you solve the problem for him. Instead of trying to resolve the situation yourself, find ways to help your child deal with the problem.

- *Brainstorm with your child about different ways to respond to bullying and cruel behavior.* You don't want him to hit or lash out at somebody who bullies him, as this might lead to violence. But you also don't want him to let other children walk all over him. Give your child ideas on how to avoid these two extremes. Remind him that ignoring a bully can sometimes cause the bully to lose interest and leave him alone, so he might want to try this approach first. Another approach is to be direct without escalating the conflict. Encourage him to look a bully in the eye, tell the person to stop, and then walk away.

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- *Keep in mind that your child may want to respond differently to someone she doesn't know as opposed to someone she considers a friend.* If she doesn't know the bully, she might want to try simply ignoring the bully. But if she considers the person a friend, she might prefer to make a comment like, "I like you, but I don't like it when you say mean things. It makes me want to walk away from you." Or, "I like playing baseball with you, but it bothers me when you say things that aren't true, and I'd like you to stop."
- *"Rehearse" situations that might be difficult.* If your son will be attending an event that's likely to include someone who has bullied him before, give him a chance to practice what he can do if the bullying happens again. Rehearse the words he might say, and help him practice saying them in a calm tone of voice.
- *Encourage your child to talk to her friends about the problem.* Your child's best friend or a close teammate might be willing to support her when bullying occurs by saying things like, "I don't think that's funny, either." Or, one of them might have experienced bullying herself and have ideas about what might be helpful.
- *Help your child understand the bully's motives.* Sometimes children who are bullied begin to think that they deserve to be treated in mean or cruel ways. Tell your child that everybody deserves to be treated courteously, and that bullies often act the way they do because it makes them feel powerful.
- *Bring up the possibility that alcohol or drugs might be involved.* Bullying may occur because an adolescent or a teenager has had too much to drink or is using drugs, and has less control over his actions. If this happens, your child's words may have no effect, because the bully won't "hear" them. Tell your child to walk away from someone who doesn't seem to be in control of his actions, and, if your child wants to say something to him, wait for another time.
- *Build your child's self-esteem.* Being bullied can make a child feel less self-confident. You can help your child feel good about herself by giving her many opportunities to participate in activities that make her feel safe and secure. Help her get involved in groups or organizations likely to attract people she can respect and admire, such as volunteering at a food pantry. Some children benefit from participating in activities in another town, where the bully has no influence. Others find that taking classes in karate or self-defense boosts their physical self-confidence.
- *Teach your child strategies for resolving conflicts.* Your child may find it easier to deal with bullies if he's had practice settling other kinds of disagreements. You can help by teaching him how to take a step-by-step approach to resolving conflicts that includes identifying the conflict, deciding what he wants to do about it, listing all the possible solutions, figuring out which would work best, coming up with a plan of action, and evaluating how well the plan worked. Then help him use role-playing to learn to apply this method to situations that might come up at school or elsewhere. For example, he might practice resolving conflicts by figuring out what he could do if he

were eating in the lunchroom and another child grabbed a bag of potato chips off his tray and wouldn't give it back.

- *Set a good example.* Children take many of their cues for dealing with other people from how they see their parents acting at home. You can help by letting your child see you responding calmly and listening to other points of view in many kinds of everyday situations -- for example, when you feel you've been overcharged by a store or when you and your spouse disagree on which movie to see.

Discouraging your child from bullying others

If you know that your child has been bullying others, it's a good idea to

- *Try to learn more about your child's emotions.* If your child is bullying others because she feels angry or unhappy about something, you may need to help her find more constructive ways of dealing with her frustrations. Spend extra time listening to her and trying to get a better sense of what might be causing the troubling behavior. Instead of punishing her for her behavior, show that you understand and care about her feelings by making comments like, "You sound very angry about that," and, "Tell me more about how you feel."
- *Set firm household rules.* Let your child and others in your family know that you won't permit name-calling or any kind of physical violence, including hitting, punching, kicking, or damaging property. Make clear what consequences your child will face if he breaks those rules -- a time out, grounding, or a suspension of privileges such as going to the mall. If your child is bullying others online, revoke computer privileges. You might also find it helpful to set up a system of rewards that your child will get when he stays within your guidelines.
- *Talk about other people's feelings.* Encourage your child to think about how the person being bullied might feel. Try acting out a recent incident in which you play the bully and your child plays the victim. You don't want to punish her, but you do want to help her understand other people's feelings and learn how to make friends, not enemies.
- *Teach your child new ways to achieve his goals.* A younger child may need to learn to ask politely for things instead of just taking what he wants. Teach him to say things like, "May I please play that game with you?" An older child may need to develop a better ability to "read" what other people say or do. Teenage bullies (or gang members) often start fights because they overreact to remarks they see as "insults," even if the remarks weren't intended that way. You might ask your teenager what made him start a fight, and help him see different ways of looking at a comment that upset him.
- *Intervene if you suspect violence is about to occur.* If your child tends to bully others in your presence, it's vital to make sure that nobody gets hurt. Step in quickly if you think your child may be about to hit somebody or say something that will hurt

another child. Give a younger child a brief time out, or ask an older child to go to her room and return when she can discuss the situation calmly.

- *Help your child find opportunities to practice getting along.* A child who has few social contacts -- or who's been going through a difficult time -- may need extra practice at relating well to others. Encourage his participation in family or other events where you'll be present and can observe the areas in which he might need help. Help him find supervised activities, such as art or swimming classes, which will allow him to relate to other children in a safe and structured environment.
- *Look into counseling.* Depending on how often the undesirable behavior occurs and how severe it seems to be, you may want to look into counseling. A child psychologist or another counselor can give you and your child ideas on how to ease the emotions that may be causing the difficulties. This counseling can be both individual and, for practice, group sessions.

Helping your child deal with strong feelings

Sometimes conflicts develop because children have very strong emotions that they don't know how to express except by getting into a fight. By spending a lot of time talking to your child about her feelings, you may be able to prevent some problems from arising.

- *Make clear that it's normal to have very strong feelings.* Tell your child that at times everybody dislikes somebody else a lot, and that's OK. What's not OK is to express those feelings by hurting another person, either physically or by saying mean or threatening words. Make sure your child understands that you will still love him even if he sometimes thinks he wants to hit or say mean things to somebody. But tell him that you want him to let you know when he feels that way, so you can help him express his feelings in a way that won't hurt anybody.
- *Encourage your child to dramatize her emotions.* Children often have feelings that they don't know how to express in words. You might make faces or draw pictures that show your own emotions, and encourage your child do the same. Or, you might encourage an older child to take an art, drama, or creative writing class that could provide a way of expressing complicated emotions.
- *Make "I" statements.* You'll probably upset your child if you criticize him for having feelings that he can't help. Making "I" statements can help you avoid this. Try not to make comments like, "You were very inconsiderate to grab the remote from your friend." Instead, you might say, "I know that it's very frustrating for you when your friend keeps the remote for a long time, but I expect you to ask for it nicely." Then show him how you ask nicely, and get him to show you how he would do it.
- *Teach your child how to say "no."* Your child may feel very strongly that she wants to avoid a conflict, such as getting into a fight with friends who want her to try drugs or alcohol, but she may not know how to say "no" to people whose friendship she wants to keep. Talk to her about the kinds of things she could say in difficult

situations, such as, “No, thanks. We have a big game coming up, and our coach says that alcohol can affect our performance.”

- *Talk about ways to let off steam.* Sometimes conflicts erupt because children are very frustrated and need to let off steam. Make sure your child has opportunities to do this, and that he knows how to use them. You might say, “When you feel very frustrated, you can go outside and kick a soccer ball, but you can’t kick your brother.” Talk about what *you* do when you feel frustrated -- go for a walk, work out at a gym, call your best friend, and talk about how you feel. It can be tremendously reassuring to a child to hear that adults -- especially his parents -- have the same kinds of feelings he does. If you know he’s feeling frustrated, you might say, “It sounds like we’ve both had a tough day. Want to go for a walk and see if that makes us feel better?” You might be surprised by how quickly the brisk exercise and a few minutes of extra attention from you help him settle down again.

When bullying occurs at school

Bullying occurs in almost all schools. In some cases, it doesn’t last long. Students who are upset that their school lost a big Friday night game may take out their frustrations on students from a rival school -- or even younger ones at their own school -- by shoving, name-calling, or threatening to “get” them. By Monday morning, they may have gotten their frustrations out of their system and calmed down again.

In other cases, the bullying becomes more severe and persistent. An exclusive group or “clique” may continually pick on or shun someone who isn’t part of their crowd. The child who is the victim may feel devastated, and, if the problem continues, may not want to go to school or may start to get lower grades.

The approach you’ll want to take to bullying at school will depend on how serious the problem seems to be, how long it’s been going on, and your child’s views on the matter. If the bullying occurs once and your child seems to be able to deal with it smoothly, it’s usually best not to intervene, especially if she’d prefer that you not get involved. However, your job as a parent is to protect your child. Don’t wait for a serious incident to occur before taking action. Talk to the teacher or guidance counselor if you have any ongoing safety concerns.

Let the school know immediately if your child suffers physical harm at school or a school event or if you are worried about a threat of violence. Let the school know if your child has become the target of certain kinds of hate-filled speech, such as remarks that involve your family’s racial or ethnic background.

If the incident occurred in a classroom, start by talking to the teacher, and give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. Don’t assume he knows about or could have prevented the problem. If the incident occurred at a school event that the teacher wasn’t responsible for -- and may not even have attended -- you might want to talk to the vice-principal, the administrator who usually deals with discipline. The teacher or

administrator may have ideas on how to resolve the situation, especially if the bully has been picking on others besides your child.

In some cases, you might want to talk to a teacher even if the bullying hasn't resulted in physical harm -- for example, if it has become so upsetting that your child doesn't want to go to school or her grades have begun to suffer. A teacher might be able to ease the situation by moving your child's seat far away from the bully, or by having a class discussion about the harm that can result from teasing or name-calling.

No matter what approach you take, keep in mind that bullies rarely pick on just one person. They tend to pick on whoever is nearest when they feel angry or frustrated. If your child is being bullied, it's likely that other children are, too, and the school will want to work with you to make sure that your child and others stay safe.

The first important step is to raise awareness on all levels. Parents can make a difference in our schools by working with teachers and school administrators to promote a zero-tolerance attitude toward bullying. This means getting everyone involved in the program, from the administration to support staff to students. In addition to empowering your own child, you can help your school take an active role in becoming a safer place for all children.

Written with the help of Charlene C. Giannetti. Ms. Giannetti is a journalist and the co-author with Margaret Sagarese of six books for parents of young adolescents,

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